
The Educational Approach to Advanced Cancer: A Preliminary Report

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Abstract

Survival from cancer depends primarily on reduction of tumor burden through surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy. But other factors such as energy levels, immunity, and will to live have long been known to play a part. Some of these factors are best provided by complementary therapy. Our program, educational in nature, attempts to make these modalities available to the patient.

Thirty-odd years ago, President Nixon declared war on cancer. Our response has been to destroy tumor with the “heavy artillery” of surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. But we have almost completely ignored the “infantry” of immunity enhancement, the “air force” of energy repletion, or the “navy” of hope and optimism, areas long recognized as important to survival. Bits and pieces of complementary care are being offered increasingly, but few if any cancer centers offer the entire array of tools that are available for increasing immunity, energy, and hope. We need to use complementary modalities with the same vigor and thought we do “conventional” medicine in order to provide the total care of which we are capable.

We have seen some victories in this war. Our knowledge of cellular and molecular mechanisms of cancerogenesis increases exponentially; new and more effective treatments emerge, and new diagnostic techniques help to detect tumors earlier. The major defeat, however, has become clear in the area of education: most patients either complement their treatment or even replace it with some “alternative” modalities.

The reasons are many. Scientific knowledge is dynamic by nature; what we presented as evidence-based yesterday may not be so today. Previous data that fruit and vegetable consumption is protective against cancer has been challenged (Van Gils, G.H. et al JAMA 2005; 293:183-193; Smith-Warner, S.A., et al. JAMA 2001; 285: 769-782). Thus sometimes the unchanging recommendations of alternative medicine seem more reliable than the shifting advices of “scientific” medicine.

All of us with cancer experience have had patients who outlived our most optimistic projections, individuals who develop a new relationship, take up a

vigorous exercise program, adopt a nutritious diet, “get religion” or whatever. We name these “remarkable recoveries,” “spontaneous remissions,” “miracle cures.” And enough of these anecdotes laid end-to-end become clinical experience. But we don’t need to posit divine intercession to explain them – simply an increase in energy stores, a maximization of immunity, the development of an optimistic attitude, or all three, and the scales are tipped toward survival (See figures 1 and 2).

Ignoring spiritual and psychological aspects of disease, and their healing power, is a shortcoming of existing cancer education programs. Several investigators have reported changes in death rates around holidays and birthdays suggesting that spiritual and social activities, and an optimistic attitude, can prolong survival. (Phillips, D.P., et al. Lancet. 1988; 2:728-732; Idler E.L., et al. AJS. 1992; 97: 1052-1079, Schofield, P., et al. Cancer:2004; 100: 1276-1282.). Although some studies question this relationship, (Young, D.C., et al. JAMA. 2004; 292:3012-3016), this important aspect has received little attention in the education, counseling and treatment of cancer patients.

One aspect of this area was recently recognized by the scientific community – the “placebo effect.” The NIH has earmarked significant funds to investigate this phenomenon, known and used by physicians for centuries. Recent study showed that physicians and nurses still use placebos in treating patients and 94% of them found placebos generally or occasionally effective (Nitzan, U., Lichtenberg, P. BMJ 2004; 329: 944-946.)

It is with these factors in mind that we have organized, on the islands of Hawaii, a multicentric program of education in cancer. The program neither examines nor treats patients, leaving all treatment to the patients’ oncologists. Patients are asked to check all changes in their health programs with their oncologists. And we attempt to keep in close touch with the oncologists with regard to the patients’ progress. To repeat, we are an educational organization, not a cancer treatment center. Our reasons for staying educational are three – we don’t want to interfere with established oncologist/patient relationships – we want to stay simple and

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focused on the information imparted – and we wish to make it easy for other groups to affiliate with us for the sake of quicker data collection and growth of the program.

Our faculties consist of practitioners from a broad array of disciplines which all contribute to one or more of the four factors of: tumor destruction, immunity, energy, and attitude. These teams usually include oncologists, exercise therapists, massage therapists, acupuncturists, naturopathic physicians, Yoga instructors, meditation teachers, and teachers of attitudinal healing. There is no doctrinal orientation, but student/patients are urged to get in touch with whatever religious resources may be important to them. Our teachers are well credentialed but chosen also for their ability to teach. And they instruct from a syllabus which assures uniformity in the information imparted from one “school” or program to the next.

In conjunction with the above, a clinical research study is being developed with the help of the University of Hawaii. This study will investigate our thesis that a patient well informed in complementary modalities for cancer treatment will outlive one not so exposed, and will have a better quality of life. It will measure the life expectancy figure predicted for each patient enrolled (from his or her oncologist) against his or her actual survival. Also utilized, as a double check, will be national survival figures for each tumor and stage. If the patients enrolled regularly exceed their predicted survival, this will prove our thesis.

We hope to enroll 300 subjects and develop an experience over three or more years. Multiple affiliated sites for the program will be involved, using our educational material and providing subjects for the clinical study. Cost per participant (patients, spouses, caregivers) runs in the \$100 range for a two-day seminar.

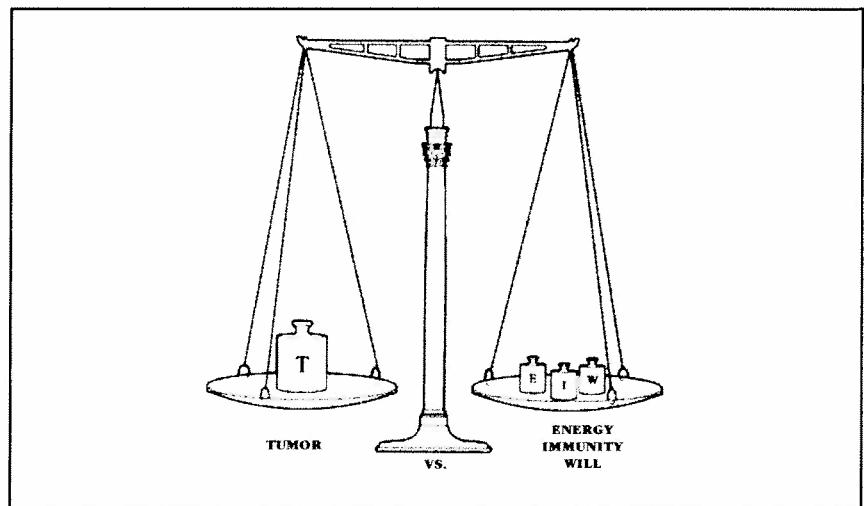


Figure 1.— Healing in the Balance

Panoramic Cancer Care					
	Less Tumor Burden	Immunity	Energy	Hope	Less Pain
EXERCISE	0	+	+	+	0
MASSAGE	0	+	+	+	0
ACUPUNCTURE	0	+	+	+	+
MEDITATION	0	+	+	+	+
CHEMOTHERAPYRADIO-THERAPY	++	Neg.	Neg.	+	?
SURGERY	++	Neg.	Neg.	+	?
NUTRITION	0	+	+	?	0
ANTIOXIDANTS	0	+	+	?	0
IMMUNITY	0	+	+	+	0
ATTITUDINAL HEALING	0	+	+	+	?
YOGA	0	+	+	+	?

Figure 2.— Treatment Modalities

A small pilot program was carried out six months ago (May, 2004) at the Straub Clinic and Hospital. Sample comments follow.

From Patients:

“Why didn’t anyone else talk to us like this before.”
 “I am more aware of beneficial courses to take, thanks to you folks.”
 “A different spiritual approach, slowing down by getting myself out of the way – making priorities and not constant confusion.”

From Oncologists:

“I feel course was very helpful to patient. She appeared to have a very firm understanding of the cancer process as it related to her condition. Understood rationale for treatment recommendations.”
 “More relaxed, calmer, more accepting and understanding of his diagnosis and condition. Less stressed.”

Our program is also described on a web site, www.AlohaCancerEducation.org. Collaboration/affiliation is invited from other groups.

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